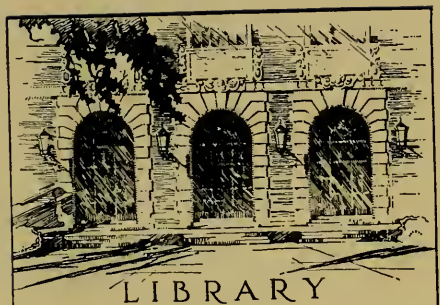

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"WHY NOT HAVE A RELIGIOUS CENSUS?"

By Ly Fred^k Cavendish

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN *C* (CHURCHMAN) *N* (NONCONFORMIST).

C. Why do you want the old Church disestablished?

N. First and foremost, because it is not the Church of the whole people, but only of a bare majority, if that.

C. Then, if you were satisfied that the Church was in a great majority, you would let her alone?

N. Yes; she might then claim to be really the Church of the people; but everybody knows the Church can't claim more than a bare half of the population, and that settles the question.

C. Stop, stop! "Everybody" doesn't know any such thing. Church people, and well-informed ones, too, believe that the Church *can* claim a great deal more than the half, and can prove, moreover, that every year she is gaining ground.

N. It's very fine talking; you'll find I am right.

C. Well, we shall certainly get no further by just contradicting each other. As a Churchman, I don't hold with you that the question turns on the counting of heads; yet it seems a sad thing, and indeed nothing short of a scandal, that Christian people should start with a difference of this sort, which might be set at rest with very little trouble.

N. Oh! you mean by taking what's called a "Religious Census." No; that's a thing I won't give in to.

C. And why not, I should like to know? Really, you're a hard fellow to please. First you tell me the matter of disestablishment must be settled by numbers; then, when I give you numbers, you dispute them; and then, when I propose a legal "count," you won't have it at any price!

N. I should have no sort of objection to our being counted, if there was any chance of its being fairly done.

C. Why should you think that would be impossible? Of course the census would be taken by Government officials, just as the usual one is taken; there would be no fear of their counting unfairly.

N. Ah, but the official would have to find out what denomination everybody belonged to, and folks might take him in.

C. Come, now, if that's your only objection, surely it can be got over. How would *you* have the thing done?

N. Well, the only way I could approve of would be for the officials to take some one Sunday and reckon up every man, woman, and child that attended public worship that day, and put them down according to the different churches and chapels.

C. Nay, that plan must needs lead to inaccurate counting. How in the world could one avoid the risk of counting the same man twice, or even oftener, or of not counting some of them at all? There's many a Churchman, and still oftener a Churchwoman, and I daresay many Dissenters, too, who go to church twice or three times on a Sunday, and not a few who may be prevented, however good Christians they may be, from going at all on a particular day. If you

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counted heads only at 11 o'clock Service, you might get *them* down all right. But then you would miss out all those, both at Church and Chapel, who only attend in the afternoon or the evening. If you counted at all the Services, you could not avoid counting the same people twice or thrice.

N. What better plan can you suggest?

C. The simplest and most straightforward in the world. I would have every one of 15 years old and upwards speak for himself or herself, and be put down under the denomination he or she should choose.

N. And suppose they should object to ticketing themselves off that way? If any Government fellow should come round asking me my religion, I should be more than half inclined to answer, "What's my religion to you?" and send him about his business.

C. That might be all very well, but you must please to remember that, right or wrong, *you* are running a-tilt at the old Church's position and endowments; she can't be blamed, therefore, for claiming that all the facts of the matter should be clearly ascertained before this big business is taken in hand. You leave us alone, and we will not bother anybody with a census.

N. There would be many besides, who don't belong to any denomination; and you can't deny that the Church would be for getting them put down to *her*, as nobody else could claim them.

C. There's no doubt that, according to her own rules, ever since the time of the Apostles, and therefore, as we believe, in the sight of God, the Church *is* responsible for all baptised people, unless they choose to join some other religious body. But I would yield that

point. There might very well be a column in the census paper headed "Unclassified" or "Undefined;" and everyone that objected to being entered under any denomination might be put down under that heading.

N. I don't think folks would like that either.

C. They must be mighty touchy then! We must surely give and take a little in the matter. You said you were willing to have the census taken, if it could be done fairly; and I am doing my very best to meet you, aye, more than half-way. Surely a man who is perfectly free to write himself down under any denomination or none has no possible ground of complaint.

N. There are plenty of people who go to both Church and chapel, just as the fancy takes them. They'd be fairly puzzled what to call themselves.

C. Then the sooner they make up their minds the better! I don't see that the great question of Disestablishment or no Disestablishment is to be kept dangling because a handful of shilly-shally people choose to halt between two opinions.

N. But what of all the children? You said you would only have entered in the census everyone over 15. Yet surely we can't leave the little ones in a Christian country out of account altogether.

C. No indeed, I only meant that under 15 they should not be asked to *choose their own* denomination. Below that age I would have them entered under their parents' denomination. Little ones in Orphanages,

Homes, Workhouse schools, and such-like institutions could be entered according to the rules under which they are already classified.

N. Put it as you will, I am as sure as can be that the Church would manage to count up all sorts of people who never darken the doors of a place of worship, and whom she can't, therefore, claim fairly.

C. *The Church would manage to count* them! My dear fellow, this is a free country; these people, like all the rest, would only be counted under *any* denomination, because *they themselves* choose it.

N. You won't find many of these Godless, "don't-go-nowhere" people among the Nonconformists.

C. No; I don't for a moment deny the piety and the large attendance at public worship of your members. All honour to them for this! But that is no reason why the "don't-go-nowheres," *who wish to be counted* as Church people, should be counted by nobody.

N. A nice set of "Nothingarians" the Church would get the credit of, then!

C. Yes; I allow with sorrow and shame that there are far too many Godless people belonging to the Church. But what has that to do with the census? We don't want to find out how many people are Godly Christians, but how many belong, of their own free choice, to each denomination.

N. But what you don't seem to see is this: If an Established Church is neglecting a number of its own members, so that they are leading Godless lives, it has forfeited its right to its position and endowments.

C. If I grant you that, for the sake of the argument, it is a reason the more for the census; for the census only will show us if there *is* a great number of "Nothingarians." Of course the larger proportion of them will put themselves down as "Unclassified;" and this will bring the facts to light. But I *don't* grant for a moment that the Church *is* neglecting her work among the lost and the ungodly. I believe she never was doing more for them, and that, among the "waste places," where she alone ministers to them.

N. That's just what we stoutly deny!

C. Well, then, let us leave off hurling contradictions, which are no better than brickbats, at each other's heads, and let us both appeal for a Religious Census, which, as I said at the outset, can set the question between us at rest, and give us firm ground from which to start fair.

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